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ABSTRACT

Thai parental attitudes about educational practice was explored in this study. Particularly, the situations between Thailand and the United States are compared. Similar to the struggles over developmentally appropriate practice in the United States, many parents in Thailand have resisted implementation of the guidelines articulated by the Thai government. The result of a survey showed that the location of the schools was the most important factor in Thai parents' enrollment decisions, similar to their United States counterparts. Thai parents placed a high value on the teaching of academic skills, but they ranked the provision of care the lowest. Associations between parental attitudes and expectations were examined. Thai parents who considered the quality of curriculum as important were unlikely to have high expectations for child care. Parental characteristics and education emerged as a mediating factor. More highly educated parents were more likely to value developmentally appropriate practices and to feel that kindergarten programs should promote children's development than less well-educated parents. This study suggests that parents need to be educated about the benefit of developmentally appropriate practice. (WP)

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Parental Resistance to Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Thailand

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Abstract

Developmentally appropriate practices, as defined by NAEYC are advocated as preferred practices for educating young children in the U.S. Similar guidelines for educating young children in Thailand have been mandated by the Thai government. This paper explores Thai parental attitudes about educational practice, particularly that which can be defined as developmentally appropriate practice, and compares the situation in Thailand to the situation in the U.S. Community education efforts to inform the public of the potential benefits of developmentally appropriate practices are needed.

Parental Attitudes About Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Thailand

Not everyone believes that developmentally appropriate practice is what is best for children. This is evident from both parental attitudes and from a spirited discussion in the literature among early childhood educators. For instance Rescorla and her colleagues, (Rescorla, Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek & Cone, 1990) found many parents felt highly academic and consequently developmentally inappropriate programs were what their young children needed and backed up their beliefs by placing their children in academic programs. In the professional arena Kessler and Swadner's (1992) volume on developmentally appropriate practice represents one of the forces behind the scholarly debate swirling around the concept of developmentally appropriate practice. More recent examples include Stipek's (1994) symposium on developmentally appropriate practice at a research conference in which academically oriented practices from the behaviorist tradition were presented as potentially appropriate because children appeared to "enjoy" workbook type activities.

Even though this scholarly debate exists, the early childhood field is relatively united in advocating child-directed learning as the optimal way to teach young children. Consequently, parents are increasingly encountering early childhood programs that may not conform to <u>their</u> notions of best practice. The focus on developmentally appropriate practice and child-directed learning within a play-based curriculum is not limited to the U.S. One example is the recent emphasis on child-directed learning endorsed by the government of Thailand. The Thai government has articulated guidelines to be followed by private early

childhood programs that are remarkably similar in intent and philosophy to the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice articulated in the U.S. by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Similar to the struggles over developmentally appropriate practice seen in the U.S., many parents in Thailand have resisted implementation of the guidelines.

Thai Kindergartens

The Thai guidelines pertain to "kindergarten" programs which serve children ages 3-6. At least one third of all Thai children in this age range attend kindergarten programs. This number is expected to increase in the near future (C. Nongmak, personal communication, June 18, 1993). A similar percentage of U.S. children in this age range are enrolled in center-based early childhood programs (Hofferth, Brayfield, Deich & Holcomb, 1991).

Thailand, situated in the Indochinese Peninsula, has a population of almost 57,000,000. Estimates of the population of Bangkok range from five and one-half million to nine million people. A great many kindergarten programs are needed to serve families with young children in Bangkok. Both public and private programs are used to support this need. Much like the U.S., private programs for preschool children play a significant role in Thai society. Unlike the U.S., however, these private early childhood programs are expected to conform to government standards for curriculum quality.

There are 741 private schools providing kindergarten programs in Thailand. This number includes schools that provide services for other educational levels (i.e., older

children) as well as the kindergarten level. There are 434 private schools which provide only kindergarten programs. The Office of the Private Education Commission indicates that at present, the number of children served in private kindergarten programs in Bangkok alone is 110,000. Clearly, a great number of Thai children and families make use of the kindergarten service and consequently will be influenced by the program provided by these kindergartens.

Historically, early childhood programs in Thailand have been influenced by Froebel and Montessori, two forces that have also been strong in the U.S. In spite of these influences which are consonant with current notions of developmentally appropriate practice, a significant number of early childhood programs in both Thailand and the U. S. have become quite academically oriented. Furthermore, parents in both countries often believe academic programs are necessary for their children to succeed later in life and most certainly to succeed as they progress through school. Parents and teachers in both countries often talk about preparing children for the next level of education rather than focusing on meeting the current educational needs of children.

The Thai government has a mechanism to directly affect the content of curricula in Thai private schools. The Office of the Private Education Commission (OPEC) articulates rules and regulations to be followed by private schools. There is no similar entity in the U.S. and given the large population of the U.S and the commitment to local control it is unlikely that a similar entity would find success here. In Thailand, the OPEC is currently operating under Private Education Plan Issue No. VII (1991-1995). Through the auspices

of this plan OPEC provides curriculum guidelines for private schools as well as resource handbooks and teacher training, workshops and conferences to assist schools and teachers in implementing curricula consistent with the guidelines. The curriculum guidelines for Kindergarten (ages 3-6) were established in 1988 because of concerns about the wide variety of curricula being implemented and the shortage of developmentally appropriate curricula.

Thai kindergarten programs are typically of a full day nature and serve functions similar to that of child care programs in the U.S. Part-time programs in Thailand are unpopular and the exception. The events of a typical day in a Thai kindergarten program are described in Table 1.

Parental attitudes

What do Thai parents think of the kind of developmentally appropriate program mandated by the OPEC? In Thailand as in the U.S., parents can express their desire for a certain type of early childhood program by their enrollment patterns. Is curriculum an important factor in Thai parents' decisions to enroll their children in one program versus another? We surveyed 40 randomly selected parents whose children were attending two Thai private kindergartens (20 parents from each program). Their rank ordering of the importance of factors in their decision on where to enroll their children are given in Table 2. Location was the most important factor in parents' enrollment decisions with over half of the parents indicating that this was the most important factor in their decision. Similarly, in the U.S. many parents indicate location is a key factor in their enrollment decisions,

although it is typically not the highest ranked factor (Bradbard, et al., 1983; Hofferth, et al., 1991). Thai parents indicated curriculum was the second factor likely to be considered when choosing a program. Thus, if two schools had a similarly accessible and convenient location then curriculum was likely to play a part in parents' decision making process. Parents in the U.S. also indicate curriculum plays an important role in their decision making (Bradbard, et al., 1983). Thai parents, but not U.S. parents, indicated program hours were the least important characteristic in their decision making, perhaps reflecting the uniformity of program hours across schools in Thailand.

Thai parents placed a high value on the teaching of academic skills in the kindergarten programs their children attended, as seen in Table 3. Interestingly, the provision of care was ranked lowest. Promoting children's development, which might be more closely aligned with developmentally appropriate practice, and promoting cultural values were ranked as moderately important. These features are not frequently cited as important by U.S. parents either (Hofferth, et al., 1991).

We also asked parents to indicate what kinds of practices they thought were best for children of kindergarten age (ages 3-6). We adapted an instrument designed to measure attitudes about developmentally appropriate practice in the U. S. (Charlesworth, et al., 1991) for this purpose. It was felt that the instrument needed adaption to fit the Thai kindergarten situation and culture. However, because of the adaptation we were unable to sum the items to create an overall score for parental attitudes about practice and so the items are presented individually. The adaptation included 18 items, each of which parents

were to rate from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). Table 4 shows the items according to mean ranking. The parents believed all the items were at least fairly important but the majority of their highest rankings were for items we would consider developmentally inappropriate as would the current OPEC plan. Only two developmentally appropriate items appeared in the top ten practices.

Parents in the U.S also want their young children to learn academic content, especially that focusing on literacy and numeracy or "letters and numbers" as many parents say. They expect the early childhood programs their children attend to teach these skills. Many parents believe that learning only occurs during teacher directed activity and that the activity must be of a didactic nature (Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud & Eggers-Pierola, 1994). Asian-American parents are even more likely than European-American parents to favor didactic practices in the programs their children attend (Milburn, 1992 as cited in Powell, 1994). The responses of the parents we studied in Thailand seem to fit well with the views of Asian-American parents.

In order to get a more detailed picture of the Thai parents we looked for associations between parental attitudes and expectations. We found that parents who considered curriculum to be important were unlikely to have high expectations for the program to provide child care and vice versa. This suggests that for some Thai parents the need for care in a convenient location may override any preferences they have for program content. A similar situation may exist in the U.S. We also found that parents who expected the

program to promote the development of social skills were less likely to value direct instruction practices.

Parental characteristics may also play a role in parents' attitudes and expectations about early childhood programs. The Thai parents we surveyed were predominately middle class and relatively well educated; over half had a least an associate level degree. When we examined these parental characteristics in relation to parental attitudes and expectations parental education emerged as a mediating factor. More highly educated parents were more likely to value developmentally appropriate practices and to feel that kindergarten programs should promote children's development.

Education about practice

As Powell (1994) has noted, many of the programmatic features parents value are antithetical to developmentally appropriate practice. Even within our profession developmentally appropriate practice, in the words of Elkind (1993, p. 56), "has been honored more in word than deed." Parents' attitudes regarding early childhood education reflect a universal concern for their children to be successful in life. It seems clear that many parents do not understand how a developmentally appropriate curriculum will provide their children with the basic skills needed to function in modern society.

While scholars debate the merits of developmentally appropriate practice, parents are making decisions regarding the curricula to which their children are exposed. To help parents make informed decisions community education on the benefits of developmentally

appropriate practice is needed. Our study suggests this need is just as great in Thailand as it is in the U.S. Parents in both countries need information on how a play-based curriculum facilitates the development of the academic skills about which they are so concerned. In Thailand a community education campaign could be directly linked to the OPEC guidelines, indicating how the practices mandated in the guidelines facilitate children's learning. While there is not a similar government mandate with which to link community education efforts in the U.S., linkages can be made to position statements and endorsements from professional organizations (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children, Southern Early Childhood Association) and to programs that have been demonstrated to be effective. Early childhood education programs should be both developmentally appropriate and able to meet the needs/goals of parents (Sigel, 1991). Educators must help parents see how developmentally appropriate practices and parental goals are consistent.

The relationship we observed between Thai parental attitudes and educational level provides some hope that educating parents on the benefits of developmentally appropriate practice may have some impact on parental attitudes in Thailand and perhaps in the U.S. The congruence of the situations in Thailand and the U.S. regarding early childhood education programs in general and curricula in particular illustrates similarities in education and parenting across cultures and behooves early childhood educators in the U.S. to attend to a wider perspective than their own.

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Table 1. Thai Kindergarten Day

7:30- 8:15	Greeting parents and children
8:15- 8:30	Pledge to the flag and prayer
8:30- 8:50	Greetings, attendance and health check
8:50- 9:10	Music and body movement
9:10-10:00	Creative and free-choice activity
10:00-10:10	Snack
10:10-10:30	Circle time
10:30-11:00	Outdoor activities
11:00-12:00	Lunch
12:00-14:00	Nap time
14:00-14:20	Transition time
14:20-14:40	Snack
14:40-15:00	Educational games

(Daily schedule from OPEC guidelines, 1990)

Table 2. Importance of program characteristics[1]

Rank	Percent	Characteristics
1	55	Location
2	38	Curriculum
4	30	Program personnel
4	20	Publicity about program
5	33	Maintenance of physical facility
6	35	Services provided
7	38	Fee

[1]Figures represent ranks chosen most frequently for each characteristic; percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 3. Parent expectations of program[1]

Rank	Percentage	Expectation
1	53	Teach academic skills
3	35	Promote children's development
3	35	Promote cultural values
4	58	Provide care

[1]Figures represent ranks chosen most frequently for each expectation; percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 4. Attitudes towards practice

Practice	Mean
Direct Instruction	4.33
Numbers & Math	4.00
Basic writing skills	3.93
Workbook & Ditto sheets	3.93
Social skills	3.88
Letters & alphabet	3.83
Foreign Language	3.75
Free choice activities	3.73
Learning by doing things themselves	3.63
Coloring predrawn forms	3.63
Music, songs & body movement	3.55
Story reading	3.53
Playground & outdoor activities	3.44
Tests & evaluation	3.20
Sand & water play	3.15
Field-trips	3.03
Non-sexist activities	3.00
Specific skills (swimming, ballet dancing)	2.90